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SUBJECT: POOR TEST SCORES PROMPT CALLS FOR REFORM OF VIETNAM'S  
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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#### Summary

1. (SBU) On June 17, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) released data showing that 320,000 students failed this year's high school graduation examinations. This year's pass rate was 25 percent lower than last year's. Some GVN officials have claimed that the lower pass rate this year is attributable to a crackdown on exam cheating, but MOET Vice Minister Dang Huynh Mai blamed the "whole educational system." Local Party officials in the past have used "good" test results to bolster their reputations with Central Party officials, according to local press. While MOET Minister Nguyen Thien Nhan has taken a tough line on the cheating scandal and vowed to improve Vietnam's educational system, it remains to be seen what results MOET's "master plan" will bring given deeply engrained methods of teaching and testing in Vietnam. End Summary.

#### Lowest Pass Rates Ever

2. (SBU) On June 17, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) released data showing that 320,000 high school students, or roughly one out of every three who took the test, failed this year's high school graduation examinations. This year's pass rate was 25 percent lower than last year's. Ho Chi Minh City, Nam Dinh Province and Thai Binh Province had the highest pass rates: 95.1 percent, 90.3 percent and 86.3 percent, respectively. Hanoi placed fourth while at the bottom was Tuyen Quang Province with only a 14 percent pass rate.

3. (SBU) According to local press, in Nghe An Province, some parents expressed shock and dismay at the province's pass rate of only 45 percent, which reportedly was "the worst result in nearly 40 years." At one school in central Quang Ngai Province, not one of the students passed the exam.

#### Cheating a Chronic Problem

4. (SBU) MOET has long been criticized for not cracking down on exam cheating and doctored examination results, according to local press. Provincial Party officials traditionally have used high pass rates to bolster their reputations with central government officials. Party official's ambitions as well as pressure from the central government for good test results have provided incentives for cheating, according to our contacts. In a 2006 survey of nearly 2000 students, 90 percent said the use of prohibited materials was the most popular trick used by students to pass exams. About 36 percent said bribing for higher grades also was common. According to GVN officials, cheating was the main reason for last year's national pass rate of over 93 percent.

15. (SBU) In May 2006, Dao Ngoc Dung, a youth member of the Communist Party's Central Committee, was found violating rules during a postgraduate exam. He was later removed from his post as head of the Communist Youth Union. In addition, the police over the past few years have caught a number of ringleaders who helped students cheat through use of technological devices. The ringleaders received relatively large sums of cash -- sometimes up to USD 4,000 per student -- for this help, according to local press accounts.

#### Anti-Cheating Movement Develops

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16. (SBU) This year, MOET kicked off a campaign against cheating after a high school teacher in the northern province of Ha Tay used his mobile phone to secretly record students cheating, and proctors not doing anything in response, during the 2006 graduation exam. National television broadcast the clips. The clips reportedly "shocked" people who work in the education sector as well as stirred a lot of public debate. After assuming his position, MOET Minister Nguyen Thien Nhan, in an effort to show his support to the Ha Tay teacher, visited the teacher's family a month after the scandal erupted.

17. (SBU) In preparation for this year's high school graduation exams, MOET initiated a "Say No to Cheating in Exams" publicity campaign. It also vowed that, this year, students would face stricter supervision during their exams. MOET called on 55,000 teachers to work as exam proctors as well as 6,000 others to inspect testing locations nationwide. In the months leading up to the exam, many provincial governments also spent billions of dong (16,000 VN Dong equal one USD) on secure school gates and walls. During the exams, Minister Nhan himself and other top MOET officials went to different provinces nationwide to witness administration of the exams.

#### Reaction to This Year's Results

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18. (SBU) In reaction to this year's low pass rate, Le Tien Hung, Head of Nghe An Province's Education Department, publicly said the results would force "students to study, teachers to teach, and families to care about their children." Le Xuan Tien, an official at MOET's High School Department, said that this year's graduation exam was "historic." For the first time, the results reflected students' "real ability," he said. The "disappointment" experienced by many parents, teachers and educators shows that the quality of instruction must be improved. Exam results should force MOET "to review curricula, retrain teachers and reform testing and evaluation procedures," Tien added.

19. (SBU) For her part, MOET Vice Minister Dang Huynh Mai publicly said that the nationwide low pass rate was not the fault of high school teachers but the "whole system." MOET and education officials for too long have allowed poorly performing students to move up to the next level, she said. These students are ill-equipped to handle high school and life after high school. In response, MOET will devise "a master plan" to upgrade nationwide teacher training as well as improve school-parent cooperation and "student care," she said.

#### Comment

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110. (SBU) The disappointing test results have had the salutary effect of highlighting in a concrete way some of the shortcomings of Vietnam's education system. MOET Minister Nhan had to take a tough public stance on the cheating scandal because the public demanded it. However, the prospects for MOET's "master plan" remain uncertain, as teaching and testing methods in Vietnam are deeply engrained, making implementation of effective educational reform a challenge. But, the plan is at least a starting point to improve a system that is in dire need of reform. End Comment.

